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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 000993

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM FJ AS
SUBJECT: AUSTRALIA GRATEFUL FOR U.S. SUPPORT ON FIJI

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Classified By: Political/Economic Counselor Edgard Kagan, for reasons 1
.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: Deeply frustrated with Fijian strongman Frank Bainimarama, Australia is determined to maintain its policy of isolating Fiji while trying to avoid overreacting. Bainimarama's recent expulsion of the Australian and New Zealand High Commissioners further confirms Australia's conviction that he has no intention of allowing a return to democracy, has marginalized anyone who might disagree with him and is likely to continue veering towards more irrational actions. Australia is grateful for the strong U.S. public opposition to the expulsions and wants to continue coordinating with us. The Australians are still thinking through a fuller response and have demarched regional and select international capitals as well as the UN for official statements condemning the expulsion. Australia sees the situation in Fiji as very bleak, and does not currently see a credible voice within the Fijian government who can reason with Bainimarama. Additionally, Australia requests that we double track its message to the UN Secretariat opposing the appointment of Fijian Colonel Pita Driti as the commander of the Fiji Guard Unit in Iraq. End Summary.

Proportional, Principled Approach

¶2. (C/NF) Richard Rowe, Pacific Division First Assistant Secretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), in a November 6 meeting underscored that Australia remains committed to its current policy towards Fiji. Australia believes it has the correct (and moral) long term policy in place. Rowe said Foreign Minister Smith urged proportionality when formulating a response. He lamented that Australia wants to up the pressure on Bainimarama but cannot find any practical solutions that do not bring more hardship on the Fijian people. While Australia continues to search for intermediate steps, it has taken all the formal short term actions it wants.

Grateful for U.S. Support

¶13. (C/NF) The Australians deeply appreciate U.S. support and Rowe emphasized that they want to continue working closely with us on Fiji. In addition to Washington, Australian diplomats have demarched all regional capitals, London, the EU, Beijing and New Delhi in recent days for statements of support that denounce the expulsion. Many of the Pacific islands nations were appalled, Rowe confided, but would not likely issue public statements. Neither China nor India have been very helpful according to Rowe.

¶14. (C/NF) Rowe inquired about current U.S. policy towards Fiji including our divergent view on the use of Fijian soldiers in UN peacekeeping missions. Pol/Econ Counselor stressed that while we understand Australia's position, U.S. policy remains unchanged. When Rowe pressed, Pol/Econ Counselor pushed back that replacing the Fijian peacekeepers would be very difficult, and that we are looking for steps that put pressure on Fiji but are not detrimental to larger U.S. interests.

Very Bleak Outlook

¶15. (C/NF) Australia sees dismal prospects for Fiji. The expulsion obliterates any small steps Australia may have been able take towards engaging Bainimarama, generally via lower level interlocutors. Rowe said neither Australia nor DFAT's trusted Fiji contacts see anyone within the Fijian government who could deliver a tough message to Bainimarama, let alone stand up to him.

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Request to Demarche UN

¶16. (C/NF) Separate but related to the current situation, Rowe requested that our UN Mission in New York formally call on the UN Secretariat to oppose the appointment of Fijian Colonel Pita Driti as the commander of the Fiji Guard Unit in Iraq. Driti was earlier nominated to be Fijian ambassador to in Kuala Lumpur but rejected by Malaysia over his human rights record. Rowe said Australia had already met with UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe on the matter.

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